

Reflecting On and Improving Classroom Devotions

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Classroom devotions are one of those things that obviously set a Christian school apart from public schools. Each day begins with an explicit acknowledgement of God. However, it's quite easy for such devotions to become sterile and passionless. It's easy to allow classroom devotions to become mediocre. This activity can become routine, going through the motions, or it can be rushed, because time is short and there are so many other important things to accomplish in the limited hours of a school day. And if this becomes the case, not only are those devotions a waste of time, they are also potential violations of the Third Commandment. If we're just going through the motions in a cold and sterile fashion, we are in grave danger of taking God's Name in vain – and what sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more? Because we're Christians who love God, we're here this afternoon to steer as far away as we can from that. Instead, also when it comes to classroom devotions we want to "rightly confess him, call upon him, and praise him in all our words and works." That's what we're aiming at here together.

This workshop is going to have two parts. In the second part, I'm going to open things up for discussion. You'll have the opportunity to share your thoughts about what I've said. You can talk about the challenges you face; you can also encourage one another with fresh ideas. You can share resources or practices that you've found helpful. In the second part, my role will be more to facilitate your discussion.

In the first part, I'm going to do the talking and we're going to look at some basic principles, the purpose, and the practice of classroom devotions. With both parts, the goal is get you reflecting on classroom devotions so that you can find ways to improve. We want to improve for the good of everyone in the classroom (teacher and students) and, of course, for the glory of the gracious God who saved us in Jesus Christ. Rather than a waste of time, we want this to be some of the best time of each school day.

Before I get into the meat of what I want to say, let me first acknowledge that I have limited classroom experience, at least at the elementary and secondary levels. I taught part-time at our Christian school in Edmonton for one year when I was in university. Apart from that, I come at this topic as a pastor – I teach catechism classes which have a devotional aspect. I'm also a father, and I believe in the vital importance of regular daily family devotions. As a father, I have a vested interest in ensuring that my kids are being led properly in devotions in school. Finally, as a sessional lecturer, I also have some connection to the Teachers College. Actually, some of what I'll say comes from discussions with my colleagues at the Teachers College.

Principles

There are three important principles which need to be brought to bear on our topic.

First, our Christian schools are **parental schools**. By that I mean that the education offered in our schools is done in the place of the parents – we sometimes use the Latin expression, *in loco parentis*. Scripture lays the responsibility for education primarily at the feet of parents. However, we recognize that parents can delegate this task to others within the covenant community, and hence we have Christian schools. I trust this is nothing new to you. But what may be new are the consequences that this principle holds for classroom devotions.

Our churches encourage every Christian family to have a devotional life in the home. We expect parents (and especially fathers) to be reading the Bible with their children and teaching them. We encourage parents to be singing with their children and praying with them. What is the function or purpose of all this spiritual activity? It all comes down to one word:

discipleship. Family worship is all about parents discipling their covenant children, teaching them to worship and follow the Master. Christian parents want to see their covenant children become disciples of Jesus, like they are. That's why they should do family devotions or family worship.

Because our schools are parental schools, classroom devotions should really be regarded as an extension of family devotions. There's a connection between these two. Our hope is that classroom devotions complement or supplement family worship, but never replace it. Of course, there's little that teachers can do to ensure that this works the way that it should. If there are families where family devotions are being neglected, you may not even know about it. Yet the goal we have in mind is to shore up and strengthen what is already being done at home – it's similar to the way that ministers should view their task in the catechism classes.

A second principle regards the students themselves. How we view the students will determine how we approach classroom devotions. There's a lot that could be said here, but let me stick to two points.

The student is a **covenant child**. Through divine sovereign grace, that child has been called into a special relationship with our God. God has already been busy with him or her. He has put his claim on that child and given rich gospel promises to that child. To sign and seal that reality, they were all baptized. At each desk, there is a child called to acknowledge God in all his/her ways and trust him through Jesus Christ. Every single student before you has that in common.

Yet each one is different. This too needs to be recognized and accounted for when we minister to their spiritual needs through devotions, whether in the home or the classroom. Some covenant children genuinely love the Lord right from their youngest years and this love grows out of a sincere faith in him. Other students have yet to respond to their God with repentance and faith. Some are in the process. Some may not ever. Just as in the family situation, each child needs to be addressed according to where they are. We should never be presumptuous about their spiritual condition. Just because they are all covenant children does not mean that we can presume that they are all Christians in the sense that they have a relationship of fellowship with God through a true faith in Christ. In fact, it would be very dangerous and unhealthy to make such a presumption.

The third principle has to do with the function of the school. The school is a community, but not just any kind of community. It is a **covenant community**. The school brings together parents and others within the covenant of grace who share the biblical desire to see covenant children receive a Christian education. Such a covenant community endeavours to do three things:

- It complements and reinforces the church and family. This is the famous church-home-school triangle. Because all of life is one, this three-way connection necessarily follows.
- It encourages and strengthens faith. With those who already have repented of their sins and trusted in Christ, believing the gospel promises signed and sealed at baptism, the covenant community nourishes faith, reassures it, and emboldens it. Because this happens at church and in the family, it needs to happen in the school too.
- It challenges unbelief and holds it accountable. The covenant community (including the school) gently and lovingly calls to repentance and faith those who do not yet see the need for it. There is recognition (BC art 29) that our covenant community will always include such people, but we do not accept it.

From these three principles, we can conclude that what happens with classroom devotions is of eternal significance. We are addressing the life of these covenant children *coram Deo*, before the face of God. That says something about the weight we should attach to our topic.

With those principles in mind, let's now move on to more carefully define the purpose of classroom devotions.

Purpose

Let me first put things in the negative. All of this might be obvious, but it's worth stating so just so that we have things clear.

First off, we don't have classroom devotions to superficially give a Christian character to the school. I have heard of schools that go by the name "Christian" but the only thing Christian about them is the fact that they read the Bible and pray first thing in the morning. No, classroom devotions are not about giving a Christian veneer to a school that otherwise rarely or never acknowledges God.

Second, we don't have classroom devotions to replace Bible class. As I'll mention in a moment, the Bible class has a different focus or emphasis. Classroom devotions have their own character and place.

Third, we **certainly** don't have classroom devotions in order to make the students moral. Classroom devotions should never have as a purpose "behaviour modification" or "moral improvement." If there are students with unregenerate hearts, simply using devotions to make them more moral might help your classroom discipline, but it doesn't help them prepare for

eternity. In fact, you will be teaching them that the Christian faith is first and foremost about how we behave, rather than about a Saviour in whom we must trust. That kind of emphasis would send across a false and destructive message.

Positively, I can think of four solid purposes that we can attach to classroom devotions.

First, there is a **relational** purpose. All of these students are already in a covenant relationship with God. We want to see them grow in the way of life within that relationship. We want to stimulate and strengthen the relationship of covenant children to their God in Jesus Christ. That means discipleship – the same thing as what parents do in the home and pastors do in the catechism class. Discipleship includes encouraging and strengthening faith, but also challenging unbelief where it may exist. We want to see all of these children disciplined with a true faith in Jesus Christ. You could call this the vertical aspect of the relational purpose.

But the relational purpose also extends to a horizontal aspect. We want to stimulate and strengthen the relationship of covenant children to one another as they live before their God in the communion of saints. Classroom devotions will bring covenant children together before God. Through this spiritual activity, they learn more of what it means to live in Christian community.

Second, there is an **affective** purpose. Here I'm thinking of addressing the heart (the seat of the affections). We want to address the heart of covenant children vis-à-vis their God. The purpose of classroom devotions is to address more the heart than the mind. This is where I think classroom devotions should differ from Bible class. In Bible class, the focus is on improving Bible knowledge. Along the way, a good Bible teacher is going to address the heart as well, but the focus is on the mind. Devotions, however, should be more geared towards the affections, stimulating love for God. I'm not saying that it should only be that, but that's an emphasis suggested by the word "devotion."

Next, we can speak of a **doxological** purpose. Through classroom devotions, we lead covenant children to pray to and sing praises to their God. God is to be glorified through classroom devotions.

Fourth and finally, there is certainly what we can call an **atmospheric** purpose. When you begin the day with classroom devotions done properly, you set the right tone for the entire day. You remind yourself and your students of the reasons why we study and work. You begin by acknowledging God and that creates the right atmosphere for acknowledging him through everything.

Finally, let me say a bit about the practice of classroom devotions.

Practice

As someone who does a bit of teaching, I know that preparation is always vital. The more time you invest in preparing, the better class you have. Conscientious thought and preparation beforehand are also important for classroom devotions.

Listen to what Scripture says in Luke 6:45, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” That’s a good place to start when we think about preparation. Does your heart have abundance out of which to speak and bring good treasure? There are two takeaways from that passage in relation to our topic. First, your personal devotional life needs constant attention. If you’re not reading and studying the Bible for yourself (and prayerfully applying it to yourself), outside of school hours and school duties, you need to start. You’re only going to speak out of the abundance of your heart and if your heart is empty, that’s going to impact the quality of your classroom devotions. Second, if you are a parent, your family devotional life also needs constant attention. Remember all of life is one – or so we say we believe. And if you’re not discipling your own children, what are you doing trying to disciple someone else’s? If you’re neglecting your primary responsibility, is what you’re doing at school merely your job or your duty? No, listen, diligence in both personal and family devotions is the pre-preparation necessary for quality classroom devotions that honour God and serve the good of our students.

In general, like I mentioned, if something like this is important, we can’t fly by the seat of our pants. Some thought beforehand needs to take place, you need a plan. That said, we should also be flexible enough to follow a different path if the situation calls for it. I have that sometimes as a catechism teacher. I have a definite plan for each lesson. But sometimes my catechism students bring up questions or make comments that lead us somewhat away from what I had planned. It’s okay – if the kids have meaningful questions, let’s address those now and carry on with the planned lesson next time.

Then there are the different elements of classroom devotions. With regard to singing, different schools might have different policies, but I can’t see why we would necessarily be bound to the Book of Praise. Of course, it’s good to keep in mind the church-home-school connection and that would lead us to mostly use the Book of Praise. But singing something else occasionally shouldn’t be an issue, so long as we use discernment and carefully reflect on what we sing. Again, I would say it’s similar to what goes on at home. At home, you’re free to sing whatever you want with family worship, but wise parents would want to reinforce the praises sung at church and so most of the singing would be from the Book of Praise.

Singing in classroom devotions also provides an opportunity for the teacher to explain, discuss, and apply what we sing in church, especially with the Psalms. Opportunities are not always there to do that in public worship, so the teacher can fill a vital role. For instance, teachers can ask students to reflect on how this or that Psalm speaks to us of Jesus Christ. In Luke 24, he said that the Psalms speak of him, so let’s be reflecting together every time we sing a Psalm on how that is true.

Who should pick the songs to be sung? Of course, we want the kids to be involved, but there are some dangers that come with allowing them to always pick the songs. As a catechism teacher, I've occasionally allowed the students to pick what we sing and I've noticed an attraction to Hymn 12 (The Song of Moses), especially some of the verses with rather descriptive language. But we should ask ourselves: why are they picking it and do we want to encourage that? If an important purpose of classroom devotion is to stimulate and strengthen faith in God, should we encourage them to sing hymns that merely entertain them? If our fun and entertainment is the goal, then our classroom devotions are losing their proper focus and again the Third Commandment is in danger of being breached. In my view, it would be better for the teacher to pick what is sung most of the time, also so that preparation can be made beforehand for discussing what is sung.

When it comes to the Bible, the basic pattern is read, explain, discuss, and apply. There are quite a number of different practices out there and some of this might depend on the grade level you're teaching. Some teachers use a devotional book of some sort. Discernment is paramount if you're going to do that. You should carefully read each devotion ahead of time to make sure that it doesn't say anything out of order. Others prefer to go through a Bible book systematically from beginning to end. Others would connect the Bible reading/devotion with what will be taught later in Bible or Church History. For example, if you're teaching on the Reformation, you might read from Romans 3. I'm sure there are other practices and perhaps you can mention them in our discussion in a few moments. Whatever it is that you do, we want to engage the students, not merely intellectually in their minds, but more importantly in their hearts. That is not an easy thing to do.

Last of all, there is prayer. Prayer should mention what has been discussed from the Scriptures; it should ask God to help us with what has been discussed. It is also important to remember the nature of prayer – it is speaking with God. We have to guard against sermonizing in our prayers. Best to be brief and to the point. A few other points about prayer:

We don't often think about the mechanics of corporate prayer. In my experience, we haven't taught that very well either. What does it mean to pray with someone leading? How does that work? Classroom devotions can be a good time to discuss the mechanics of prayer and what it means to pray together and **how** to pray together.

Sometimes it can be instructive to walk through a Christian school past classrooms being led in prayer by a teacher. What you will see could be very disappointing – kids with their eyes open, goofing around (very quietly) with one another, while the teacher is piously oblivious to all of it. Sometimes, if you would only look, you would see that there are students obviously not engaged with the prayer being offered in classroom devotions. First, if you care about your students and their spiritual well-being, I think it's worthwhile to look on occasion. And then when you notice a student not engaged, the solution is not to get them in line so that they behave right, go through the right motions, keeping their hands folded and eyes closed. No, the solution is to engage the heart. The solution is to approach them individually and ask where they're at with the Lord. Do they pray to him by themselves? Why are they not praying

in the classroom devotion time? We have to dig deeper to find the real problems that need to be addressed. If you care about the spiritual well-being of your students, this is something you'll take seriously.

Then, last of all, there's the matter of prayer requests. Again, you want to involve the students as much as possible. That's commendable. But there are dangers that lurk here, dangers that need to be conscientiously mitigated. I asked my kids about this practice of prayer requests and one of my daughters described it as often being a "competition to see who has the most dramatic life events." Making prayer requests into sanctified pious gossip is another danger we need to recognize. There is a practical way to address these problems. Instead of having the students vocalize their prayer requests, it would be better to have them write them down and hand them to the teacher for prior review. Since prayer is offered throughout the day (including at lunch), perhaps those requests can be slotted in a prayer somewhere other than morning devotions.

Classroom devotions are important and we should probably think about them more than we do. That's especially because so much is at stake. Let me now turn to the second part of the workshop...